

The Minstrel

Redeemer University College's Poetry and Fiction Magazine

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THE MINSTREL
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the Minstrel's Annual Contest Winners:

Poetry

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Fiction

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"It took me fifteen years to discover that I had no talent for writing, but I couldn't give it up because by that time I was too famous."

Robert Benchley

Editor: Angela Reitsma
Assistant Editor: Brett Dewing
Faculty Advisor: Hugh Cook

Cover Photo: Danny Irvine

**First Place
Poetry**

you and I

when lakes run red
and sunsets fade to grey
with envy of this giddy state
we are part of,
you and I
may paint a poem
inscribe beauty on a canvas
carve our names in stone
and still
not know
what we are

how much the birds
long to sing our freedom
--which is also bondage,
but the sweetest we've known

this thought/idea/touch/emotion chokes me
by its tenderness blent with passion
and I fear I shall consume you
as you have me
but my fear
is potent craving, thick and sweet
like whiskey spilt upon my lips
from the jar of some reluctant god
on our undeserving upturned faces

and though
I will be no man's stolen Helen
nor devoted Juliet

I will take that
which you unwittingly bestow on me
and watch over it more carefully
than were it our unborn child

Rietje van Arragon

**First Place
Fiction**

ink on paper

Again.

The man gets out of bed. He stands, put his clothes on. Shirt white, tie blue dotted, suit grey conservative. He walks into the kitchen and eats breakfast, cereal and milk, no toast. He then stands, takes his briefcase black leather by the handle, opens the door walks to his left, down the stairs, out the back door of the apartment building and to the door of his car third from the left, red no cd player gray interior blinking red guardian light. The key goes in the ignition, clockwise turn, out the driveway and on to the street, stop, wait for the light. A quick stop for coffee XL DD. He pulls into the parking lot at work key counter-clockwise and out the door, hand in briefcase. He joins a crowd of the hard work/Monday night football ethic people. Eager to start. Some talk to friends "hey did ya see that game!" He does not. Some even have newspapers to read and one, a Melissa secretary general pool, has that hideous red dress on. He goes straight to his office, sits down and opens his e-mail.

(this is not how it's supposed to be.)

{I know.}

(you are supposed to yawn, hit the snooze, cuddle closer. Get up make coffee, wake the kids, grab the paper, kiss someone. A dog that fetches, maybe a cat. And paintings, on the wall, something between the thermostat and light switches. More, there should be, more, there has to be, more.)

{there is.}

(so where is it?)

{wait for it.}

(wait for it? what are we here for, to wait for it?)

{wait for it}

The day goes.

He goes to meetings, projections analysis strengths weaknesses markets shares margins discussed. He has another coffee, of slightly worse quality than before but he hardly notices. He goes to lunch with his laptop and comes back to the phone the desk the e-mail. The afternoon goes. He plays mine sweeper for an hour, mingled with solitaire, free cell. At the end of the day he is chased from the building by a vacuum cleaner. He sits in his car for 34 minutes before key clockwise street Chinese takeout and neutral color walls with light switch installation art.

(this isn't more, its less)

{I told you to wait}

(he did something in the morning, this, this is nothing)

{you have to wait for it}

(nope)

"Hello?"

The man looks up with a start, standing with in hand that haven't made it to the front door wood painted gray brass number peephole.

"Yes...?"

"Hi my name is Cindy, I just moved into the building, into two twenty two," says a blonde lady, presumably

Cindy, where did she come from? Her hand hangs in front of him for a minute before he remembers and closes the hand around hers for a second. This seems to satisfy her, for she takes her hand back with a big smile. "I'm new in town and I was wondering, I mean I don't know anyone yet, you have to start somewhere so, if we could have, maybe, dinner sometime?"

He pauses and says "Uh, okay, tomorrow?"

She smiles back at him, not that he smiled, really, just moved his mouth, and with a quick "See you at seven then!", she disappears back into her apartment.

The man stands there for a second, remembers the key and enters the apartment. He sits in the dark for a second and then opens up his dinner and his laptop. Harsh tapping noises fill the room, dancing with slimy organic ones bouncing off the barely colored walls with only a dying red sun and faded computer light witnessing. He gets up once. To gather clothing door left steps right door. A machine coins CLINK door left steps right door. The evening goes.

{what do you think you are doing}

(changing things, it's a little gloomy, that's all)

{it's not going to make a difference, you know that, he's a symbol, not a man}

(it will too change, symbols aren't real, dinner is, it'll change)

{it won't. and the dialogue sucks too}

Around the time the street lights come alive, the man gets up and leaves the apartment. He goes back to the car clockwise and exits the parking lot, onto the street some turns, into another parking lot counterclockwise, close the door. He walks up to a door, opens it, and walks into a bar with flashing lights and dancing drinks with bodies attached. Some of the drinks are expensive with umbrellas and fruit, some are domestic and bottled. It doesn't matter, it's all the same. He gets a drink domestic to dance with and stands at the bar. He looks around at the people looking around.

(...but it's a start)

{.....?}

(right?)

{are you trying to convince me? he is there and so are all the other people but what do you mean by all that?}

(well, there's others and, well, possibilities. definite possibilities.)

{there's others at work...}

(that's different, it's work, you have to be...plus there's work and stuff. here, nothings in the way, just possibilities.)

He leaves the bar. He goes to the bathroom, changes place at the bar. The women, ladies, girls there moved as well, but never it seemed to the same place, at least for long. He gets into the car clockwise go turn stop key counterclockwise and up the steps. The apartment is still there, the computer is still there, patient. The aluminum dishes are there as well, dirty forks and an empty Coke(TM) can as well. He walks to the bedroom, discarding tie coat shoes. A tuxedo kitten purrs up to his leg but is discarded as well.

{first a blonde, now a ...kitten?}

(its a step, in the right direction, he's lonely, you can see that.)

{but we're not to interfere, anything he does he can do by himself, he can choose, he has choice.}

(but he's not doing well, he's drowning, not swimming...)

{there's a lifeboat, he can use it.}

(but the waves, he can't see the boat, he needs the boat, he needs us.)

{...and its not our place. besides a one pound purring ball of fluff can't pull a full grown 168 pound man into a boat. get rid of the kitten, get rid of the blonde.....we don't have to like it or agree, we're just here.}

He stops in the door of the bedroom. Mostly neat and tidy, bed not made, alarm clock on the bedside table, dresser and cologne bottles, neutral walls. He looks at it and goes back to the living room. Sofa, T.V., V.C.R., remote control, coffee table, balcony doors, ivory walls. He opens the balcony doors and looks out into the night. The city sits there, makes some noise: cop cars, buses, muted footfalls, a vague hum coming from nowhere but one that you can almost point to, ever-present omni-present noise just there. A man made fluorescent glow hits his face and colors the red brick sides of the building a milky yellow with gray lumps of shading for effect. The man steps over the threshold to grab hold of the railing and he moves, vaulting over the railing in one smooth motion. And the city swallows him up, accepts him without pause.

And the night goes.

And the city goes.

Tomorrow.

Again.

(you shit, you little shit, you could have warned me, you could've... we could've...)

{it's not our place, we..}

(like hell it's not....)

Al Bick

insomnia

i let you win
forgive and forget
but i tried and i tried and i
Can't.
so you are free in your
whitewashed purity
and i
can't sleep at night

Beth Luchies

**Softer flickers show the shadows
(Friendship is a new flame)**

I thought you had been
blown out of me
and
only the smoke
of your essence
remained
But you lit a new match
and the smoke
flashed
white hot
I smouldered
wondering
where is this going?

I told you I was burning
you gently doused the flame
told me I was glowing
I told you the same
Now what lies between us
is almost
free of pain
the fire now is smaller
It is different
that is plain
people can come closer
around a smaller flame

Walter Miedema

I Wish...

I wish that when
I looked into your eyes,
I could look deep enough
to see everything about you —
your whole life,
places you've seen,
experiences you've had,
pain that you have overcome.

I wish that if you looked
deep enough into mine,
if you cared that much,
you would see the same,
and we would understand.

Laura Postuma

reincarnation

i killed you and
left you for Dead
but the knife cut slippery on the ice
and you bled
for only a little while so
i stuck on a bandaid
and pretended i was fine.

Beth Luchies

Walden Pond

I sit on the shore of Walden Pond, marveling at its clarity
and depth.

Uninterrupted meditations supply me with time to relish nature's
every breath.

Rejuvenated by the subtle scents of spring, I embrace the new birth that
it brings.

As I watch the fish-hawk penetrate the water's glassy surface, my tranquility
is destroyed.

The struggle for life stirs up the stillness of the water, which becomes murky
and tainted.

I look away to notice a branch fall to the ground from the weight of its
lifeless fruit.

And I realize that only through the work of nature can this fruit gain
new birth.

*"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life.
And see if I could not learn what it had to teach and not, when I came to die, discover that I had
not lived."*

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)

Sylvia Bryan

Shall I compare thee to an autumn's day?
Thou art so lovely in thy coloured guise.
All Heaven's rays plead lasting summer's stay;
Pending icy grips easy to despise
(Ventrums summers longed to remember)
Yet falling leaves shall not have fall'n from thee.
On barren trees in the chilled November,
In powdered early snow, thy love I see!
Lost leaves showered down are thy love displayed
Yet thou, to makest love my happy state,
Hath stood my side to prove that thou hast stayed
So leaves our autumn colour's fleeting date.
Thus winter coats thy branch in glittered rime,
And now thou grantest me thy season's time.

Amanda Paterson

Now in Shakespeare's task I'll try my hand
To sit me down and write in verse.
My thoughts, alas, resist command,
I frown and fret, my lips I purse
I am commissioned by a friend
To write for Minstrel's empty pages
But these clumsy verses that I've penned
Are badly wrapped and empty packages.
The rhyme-scheme, measure, rhythm, and beat
All confound this bit of writing;
The matter, words, iambs, and feet
Make this, my task, less than inviting.
Discouraged now, I'll no more on it.
I simply cannot write a sonnet.

Anita Brinkman

Autumn

The trees were waving goodbye
Today I saw
Old friends falling to die.
A glorious panorama with no flaw,
but their leaving.

Susan Creer

the boy who smoked weed for jesus

He has smooth feline careful touch.
I am clumsy. I am actrice.

We avoid the foolishness in pleasure
we open fully - fully tender.

WE ARE TARNISHED PURE

Sweet Sister Glass sister. Do not play with ancient fire.
Do not ride the ancient waves of past.

Look at me Sister Glass, seek our wisdom Gemini.
A DIRTY SINNER IS COME CLEAN.

Lindsay Adams

answers

you
tell me my prayer
will
be answered if i just
delight
in the Lord

and lost in loneliness
i
stare that delight cannot be
forced
anymore than you can make
yourself
mourn.

Judith Byl

**Second Place
Poetry**

fire

her eyes kiln
an anger I do not
understand as she screams
about something small
but it is not small (to her)
it is not fair

and I can only (fearfully)
imagine why
she fears
unfairness.

Judith Byl

The Edge at 12:01

When you went into The Edge, you always went in looking for something. Mostly it was a good time, the chance to lose yourself in the flow of the music, to catch the tail of the light show, to feel the beat of the drums through and through one's sobbing soul, and forget. Some go to call on their mistress, be she person or alcohol, and move across the dance floor clasped to each other, body to body. Surprisingly few come through the neon doors looking for friends. You come alone; but if you are lucky, you will not leave alone. The music that thrums through the club is solitary, but not lonely.

Grant came looking for his daughter. There is a room above the club, next to the DJ's stand; a room lit with pink clouds and prancing ponies where only the vaguest beat from the music could be heard. The room is a favour for Grant, who often dealt in favors, in trades and bargins, as they brought better results than money. The room is a large favor, a favor out of tune with the club, with the dancers below and the racing lights; but the bargain struck was beneficial to all, and all are distantly content, if not happy.

Grant trots up the iron stairs with a light tread, keeping carefully out of tune with the music. He is also careful not to look down, where the neon lights raced and bodies twisted. He frowns, and turns the collar of his jacket up, to hide the view below. It was unforgivably late. He'd have to take Owly out the back way. God forbid she'd look below and become entranced by the music.

He reaches the room above, the wide iron catwalk, the DJ's platform, the room-that-is-a-favor and opens the door, swinging it inward. Immediately in time with the soundproof walls, the music silences. May sees him from outside the wide window, out on the DJ's roost, and waves. She leaves the twisting turntables and comes through the opposite door, standing on tip-toe to brush her lips against his cheek. This is her greeting, made to all and meaning nothing, but he still stiffens involuntarily and turns his eyes away.

"Heyyyy," she smiles. "She conked out a while back. I let her be. God, you're late."

"I know," he says, ashamed. It wasn't May, of course. There was no guile, no judgement in her open features, but he still feels unworthy. The critic inside him roars, screaming *bad parent bad father how could you??* and he shouts back at it: *I'm here, aren't I?? I'm not abandoning her; I have to work! Leave me alone.*

But it still doesn't excuse his lateness.

"What happened?" she asks; but her eyes were bright, and Grant knew if he told her the truth, it would eventually reach the floor, and rise up, a delicious, haunting rumour for all to tell. Rumors about him are the best kind of rumors. Rumors about him reach up, to the glowing throne of politics and power. He was entangled there, unwilling, but it was necessary evil.

He still does not tell, though. He guards himself too well. May sighs, but does not press.

"Oh, nothing," he shrugs. "Just late. Sorry. Where is she?"

"Asleep in the back. Where else?" she says teasingly, eyeing him. Her oval face is lit with a curlicue half-smile, beguiling under her shock of green hair. C'mon, she begs, c'mon, dance with me. He isn't in the mood; the just-finished day weighs too heavily on him and he moves past her, towards another door, this one decorated with a smiling cartoon elephant.

And so she was. Asleep, chubby starfish-shaped hands tucked under her round chin, indigo hair haloing her face, clashing with the pristine white of the pillow.

"Thanks, May," Grant says huskily, and bends suddenly, to press his own adult face against the sleeping child's neck. *What are you doing?* something inside him shrieks, and he squeezes his

eyes shut, wishing. *What am I doing...?* he thinks, echoing the voice. *What am I doing keeping her here? God, if I wasn't so broke... If I didn't have to work... If if if...*

If only the City spun away, and came back washed pure and clean of it's neon garb. If only it's cleansing meant green parks and swingsets. If only the grey sky split and blue spilled upon the drab buildings; blue that rose up and above, that curled around him and her and made all . . . *perfect*.

She wakes, suddenly, sensing him.

"Hi Daddy," she says groggily, and reaches for him.

"Hi Owly. Ready to go?"

May watches them from the outer room. The music calls to her, the turntables gyrating with animalistic fury, sounding in time with the twisting bodies. But there, in the inner room ringed with fluffy clouds and doe-eyed ponies, there, as Grant pulls the child's sweater over her head, so that her hair is caught in the neck, making her giggle sleepily.... There, in some distant inner womb, that calls to her too. She turns away.

"Daddy, can I say good-bye to Max?"

She is still half asleep, and Grant dismisses the 'X' as a mere lisp.

"Sure, May's right outside."

"No," and she insistently comes awake. "Max! I want to say good-bye to *Max*."

He carries her into the outer room, where the wide window displays the muted club. May is still standing there, still looking with that bemused expression.

"Who's Max?" he asks her. She grins, broadly.

"Oh! New girl. Just came in last week. She's singing for the club, but I think she likes kids or something, 'cause she was up here earlier. Read a book to Owly." It comes out in a rush, and May's cheek's flush. There is something there, something interesting and sly about her words. Grant tilts his head, looking at her quizzically.

"Max? A girl?"

"It's what she calls herself. We don't put . . . uh, we don't care about names here. She's Max." And again May smiles, again with that excited, knowing smile. Again, and again. It chimes in time with the vague beat of the muted music.

"Wanna meet her?"

"I want to say good-bye," Owly says, head tucked beneath Grant's chin. She is slipping away, and the words have a dreamy quality.

"I . . ." he hesitates. "I really should go. It's really late."

"Yeah," says May. "Pity. You'd like her." Again the smile. That knowing, infuriating smile.

"I should go," he mutters again and moves to the door which opens suddenly from the other side.

He is close enough to see the freckles spotting her snub nose. He is close enough to see the sudden dilation of her pupils as she takes him in, close enough to see the flowers painted childishly around her eyes. The flowers are three different shades of blue and circle her dark eyes, the colours sharp next to the paleness of her skin. *This must be her*.

"Hi," she says, but it was not for him. Owly reached a starfish-shaped hand out to her and she caught it between slender fingers.

Her gaze jolts back to him, her eyes as wide and unfocussed as a newborn's. She blinks, carefully, the way an owl blinks, in animalistic innocence. She is beautiful in that way. Whole and untouched, the blue flowers the only sign of man-made interference. In an age of cosmetic perfection, her freckles burn on her upturned nose, and her eyes are brown, not kewpie-doll blue.

He holds his breath. He wonders if May knows. No, she must know, and the girl in front of him would have been hired to make a point, despite the horrible illegality of the action.

But the girl smiles at him, and is even more beautiful for it. If she saw through him, there is no sign.

"Hi. You're Grant, right? I've heard a lot about you," she says shyly, and blinks again, still in

that careful, mechanical way.

He smiles, nods, and turns his head downward, to Owly, so he will not have to look at her. He is conflicted, and Owly's voice rises in the past: *No! Max! I want to say good-by to Max.* He dangles between what he has been taught, and what is standing before him, with freckles on her pretty nose.

They speak, briefly. She smiles and ducks her head awkwardly and laughs once. They are mirrors, one distantly careful, the other eager to befriend. Below the beat of the music changes and black light roars across the club. White becomes lit by black, and shines with a neon glow. Smiles glare in the night, people laughing at their shining teeth.

"That's my cue," she says suddenly, and almost bows.

"See you!" And she skips away, lightly. Lighter than him, lighter than anything human. He looks away, careful not to watch her as she leaves. He is almost trembling.

"I can't believe you let that thing near my daughter," he says, and May's head jerks up, surprised.

"Grant, she's just as human as you or I—"

"No, it's not," he says softly, and Owly squirms in his arms.

He takes her out the back way. She has her arms wrapped so tightly around his neck he is almost choking. At the top of the iron stairs he pauses. He hadn't meant to stop there, but he still pauses, and the music from below rises up and swirls around his ankles. Max is on the little stage below, brown hair flying. Her eyes are brilliantly lit, and even from the top of the stairs, he can see the freckles sprinkling her imperfect nose. Lights explode behind her, pierce her, and for a moment he imagines he can see through her, into her mechanical skeleton and heart. But the voice that rises about the chaos is tragic, and unspeakably beautiful.

"That's Max," says Owly, but her voice is worried. Something has twisted in her little world, confusing her.

"Yeah," he says, and turns away.

From the little stage, the android looks out over the bobbing heads of the dancers and watches him go. Her dark, very-real eyes are filled with a wordless pity.

Faith Hicks



artwork by Faith Hicks

Untitled

I see a child
lost and lonely,
hiding there
behind that mirror.
Questioning existence,
wondering if anything is.
Eyes can see,
Ears can hear,
but both can be fooled.
For the truth
trust your heart
and that little child
hiding there
behind the mirror.

Danielle van Beveren

My Belly-Button

When I was younger,
My Dad told me oft-
If I unscrewed my belly-button
My bum would fall off!

Stephen Van Breda

first snow

you arrive at last
and greet me
a timid breath
upon my skin
exploring and dancing
I shiver under
your tender promise
and, breathless, endure
the chill of
diamond-touched kisses
against my lips

Rietje van Arragon

If I could see you now,
I'd jump off snowy mountain
I'd touch you really slowly.
Hands on hair,
Palms on cheeks,
Thumbs on eyelids.
Then,
I'd breathe
We would sit down
And I'd open my precious book.
Only five words would crumble off my tongue
Before you'd
Jerk
 Your
 Head
From my shoulder
And run like Hell
Back to the nothingness
From which you came.

Jenn Veenstra

Seasons

Does it matter what days I call my own
or that my hair turns colour with the leaves.
It's the weather that makes me smile or frown;
my mood swings back and forth as the wind blows.

In the laziness of summer I am sticky slow
blood moves thick like molasses in my veins.
My skin melts on hot days
and my thoughts evaporate into the sky.

Winter comes
My eyes glaze over, a skim appears
brittle hair breaks and falls,
crackling and splitting as it hits the ground.
Stiff clothes, and stiff joints
move like creaking trunks
sway, move where the wind pushes,
and break where it pulls too hard.

Hot-golden-sun-oil
needed to thaw frozen joints and hardened cores,
to move syrup through cold veins; pump blood to icy hearts
spring breeze warms frozen hands
colour rushes back to the hills and they bloom in energy.
Red warm hearts match robins' breasts
and jumping nerves chirp as music fills the air.

The earth is alive and I am awake
I dance with the wind and grow in the rain
my eyes follow the sun across the sky
and each day my eyelids wave good-bye
as I turn to watch another season pass.

Alida Brinkman

Unleash

“Unleash me!”
You knelt before the altar
Forgiveness six words away
Repentance on its shores
Hatred
Sheer and terrifying
Consumed you
The Holy Mother
Began to bleed
Her virgin belly scarlet
With the bile of her unborn
“You’ve abandoned me!”
You pleaded to your Saviour
He continued to die
Nailed to the wood
Helpless as a child
The tyranny of reflection
Suffocated you
Your unborn child
Screamed for life
But you nailed him to the cross

Jessica Payton

Dragons

There’s a dragon in my bed
And I did not invite it.
I don’t know if it’s ‘live or dead’,
So maybe I will bite it.

Stephen VanBreda

love come down

you love
me and you are
a thousand words to
find in a dictionary and then
you are more there is no
word or catch phrase
to contain you as
everything is from you
and in you and yet
I call you my
father.

-Judith Byl

The Little Things

Glass Cat
in the second floor window
If you jumped
would you shatter?

Only a shard
need be Lodged
in my consciousness
to realise
A Smile
will reveal itself
When I'm walking life
and
Unwittingly
scratch myself
on the claws of crystal kittens

Walter Miedema

The Night

The boy sat alone on the edge of his misery. All of the things that dictated his life were pounding in his head. Nothing really made sense, and nothing felt satisfying. He felt incomplete and perfectly void. Vacantly, he looked down at his bare feet on the worn carpet and wondered if he would ever feel whole. His mind felt unhealthy and grainy, like someone had leaked rough, angry pieces into it. He thought about the next day, the next week, the next year. It was all monotonous, superficial...confining. Like a prison. Failing to come to any reasonable conclusions, he surrendered himself to the quietness of his hard bedsheets, and they sealed him into a tight, bitter package of doubts. He tried to terminate all thought and reasoning, but the cold rim of everything he resented was lodged firmly in the way of his desire to sleep.

There in the massive darkness he felt enraged at indefinable situations and feelings, and yet he had no useful response to them. He stared at a faint outline in the dark, having no idea what it was, and not particularly caring either...yet it seemed to grow in size as he looked. He sat up with eerie shock when he realized it was coming closer to him, and his heart spilled against his ribs with sickening panic. Before he could speak, a warm hand was held to his mouth and he froze. A face emerged behind the hand, which fell from his lips silently. With the face came a female voice, a textured whisper that touched the skin on his neck and made him shiver. The voice said weightlessly, "I can't sleep until you do." He hesitantly reached out and touched the face, not trusting his own mind that this could be real. His trembling palm met wet skin, tears that had been pouring and curling gently down her cheeks. He realized that he knew this face well, and that he had traced it with his fingers a hundred times before.

"How did you get here?" he cried in astonishment.

"Sshhh," she breathed. "I just want you to go to sleep. These obsessions that make you think so much are destroying you and I can't watch anymore...it overwhelms my heart. Please don't let anything have that much power...." Her voice evaporated into silent tears once again. He exhaled with great effort, and looked down at his lap.

"I can't just make it go away. It's not that easy...I wish that it was, believe me, but.....there's nothing I can do." He stole her hand from where it rested on the sheets and held it in both of his. She said nothing, only kept her head down. Filling his nostrils with air that was stained with her scent, he put gentle pressure under her chin with his thumb. She reluctantly met his eyes with her own, and he saw her face as smooth, but fragmented in the restricting blackness.

"I know," she said finally, "But the fact that it won't go away can't make me lose the desire to want it to."

He closed his eyes to organize his next set of words, his sore mind toppling over itself again and again. There was nothing he could say that could demonstrate what he felt. He opened his eyes again and, not even understanding his own actions, took her hand and placed it over his heart. Her fingers tensed, twisting and flexing to try to gain their freedom from his powerful grip. He held steady to them and they ceased their wrenching.

"Do you understand? Do you see it now?" he murmured into the dark. Her hand reaching to him out of the blackness was his only evidence that she was even there with him.

"Yes...yes, I understand it. But can't you stop it somehow? Isn't there a way to--"

"No. This is the way it is. There is nothing that I can do," he said simply. He felt one last breath of her fresh, soft atmosphere upon his body, and then she was gone.

He sat in the dark for several moments, meditating on what had just happened. It seemed too flimsy and thin to have substance enough for his mind to take hold of. It kept slipping past his consciousness every time he tried to possess it. Yet he knew that it was there, and that it was very, very real. He slid under the soft covers of his bed, and they cradled him like a newborn baby. He closed his eyes and waited patiently for sleep to come. It found him.

The Value of Silver

He didn't care. He didn't; he just didn't. He sat there listening to the professor ramble on, concentrating on something else and not caring. He sat there, and all he could see was Hank Reder's inflated body painstakingly taking notes. With his pen. The importance of whatever class he was in was violently driven from his mind by the soft scribble of the pen. It moved over the page, grasped in Hank's pudgy hand, being forced to work for a master it didn't love. That was his pen, Justin Thowle's pen, its smooth silver surface tarnished by sweaty, dirty digits. He forced his mind to concentrate on the lecture, to forget the pen. It was gone.

That night, Justin tore his apartment apart. Cushions lay strewn over the floors and tables while the dishes sat patiently on the kitchen floor. Justin searched his laundry hamper extensively one last time. The pen wasn't there. He knew people would think he was nuts, obsessed. They'd say, "It's just a pen, forget about it, relax." He threw the hamper across the room to bounce crazily off the desk. They never understood. The pen meant more than its \$27.95 price tag that was arbitrarily assigned to it by Barb at the *Business Bulk Supply Depot*. It was about power, control. His control over the work, in forcing his will through the pen to the paper. The pen would sit aristocratically over the work. Just holding it made him feel able. Able to hypothesize, to create, to expound, to support. He needed this pen. Another pen, a pen squeezed into a plastic bag with nine identical siblings, to be used up and thrown away; it could never do that.

He sat in front of the TV amidst the wreckage of his apartment for the rest of the night, staring a hole through the empty forehead of the pretty celebrity occupying space on the *Dave Dreno Show*. The laugh track echoed through his mind. He tried to focus on when and where he had lost the pen, but he couldn't. He only knew that one day it had vanished, and the next day it was in Hank's fat hand.

In class the next day, he couldn't concentrate. The lights gossiped about the incident to the windows while the garbage can squatting in the corner invited him over; it knew exactly how he felt. Hank's rotund hand still caressed the pen. The test that he sat through was a blur that sped swiftly by while he watched. He failed. It wasn't his fault. He knew the subject; the pen he held did not. How could it? It was a tawdry plastic thing, raised uncaringly in a cold factory and pushed out into the world, with millions like it, to fend for itself. He had nothing but sympathy for the poor thing, even as he abandoned it in the library, destined to be crushed under the cruel fist of some muscle-bound speed freak.

The absence of his pen gnawed away at him, as if he had swallowed a piranha instead of a goldfish at some frat party. His mind was on some other planet, puzzling over the inhabitants of earth whose routines and activities seemed vaguely familiar but unfathomable. Going from his apartment to the cafeteria, he had walked right through a pick-up game of football, busting up a touchdown play. He could only stare dimly back at the sweaty jock who violently confronted him. The other players barely restrained a massacre on the front quad while Justin resumed his trip, still focused on the pen. The football player and his alien emotions didn't even register on his mind. He had to have his pen back, even if he had to steal it back. It wouldn't be theft, though, or even wrong, for it did belong to him. It was his pen. It wasn't as if he was going walk out of the Louvre with the Mona Lisa or push some blue-haired granny into traffic. He was just going to wait for that moment when he could calmly pick up the pen and walk away with it. So he started to follow Hank. He learned Hank's schedule cold. From his linebacker-sized breakfast to his late night coffee study sessions, Justin knew Hank's every move.

And then, opportunity knocked. One night, Hank stopped off at *Jitters*, the on-campus coffee bar. It was kinda crowded, so Hank dumped his bag off at a corner table and then lumbered off to get his double espresso latte. Claiming a table was a campus tradition, the pre-law students even joked about it. They claimed the book bags the students carried were superior life forms, and as such, one had to be

subservient to them, for they did contain all the knowledge the students lusted after. And exactly who carried whom everywhere? It was something Justin understood innately, but at the moment didn't care. For opportunity wasn't just knocking on the door but had a full-sized medieval battering ram in action. He slowly, casually, made his way to the corner table. Chairs leapt out treacherously at him and the espresso machine hissed in alarm to warn Hank. Hank was oblivious to their efforts, concentrating on his caffeine and its sugar content. Justin's hand crept into the faded canvas bag and clumsily searched for his pen. It was shoved in some dark corner, associating with used chocolate bar wrappers and moldy donut halves. He greedily, lovingly, wrapped his hand around the pen and reclaimed it. It was his. Victory.

He turned around, saw Hank staring at him, and froze.

"Hey, that's my bag." Hank bellowed, "He's taking stuff out of my bag, he's stealing my stuff!"

Students looked up to see what was happening, anything for a diversion from their books. Justin panicked and started to run, pushing over some bubble-headed sorority girl in a desperate attempt to flee. She crashed into a table, sending coffee, sticky buns, and books flying. Pandemonium reigned. Justin bounced off some weight lifter's chest in his mad rush to flee. The walking steroid made a clumsy grasp at him but missed, not used to objects that were smarter and faster than dumbbells. Justin was now on a collision course with Hank who had dropped his coffee to meet him man-to-man. They collided and fell to the floor, Hank trying to grab Justin, Justin trying to hold on to the pen. Justin dimly heard the students laugh at this ridiculous sight, the cheese-puff wrestling on the floor with the pretzel stick. The pen was what mattered, and as long as he had it, the world could go hang. Hank's full weight suddenly landed on Justin's arm, causing him to yell in pain and send the pen skidding across the linoleum floor. He yelled again, not in pain but out of terror, for the pen was lost among a sea of black boots and ragged canvas shoes. He elbowed Hank in the eye and skittered across the floor, pursuing his pen. Two feet away from the pen, Hank and some bystander, out to impress his girlfriend, landed on him. Justin could only stare at the pen that was so close, only inches away, but couldn't even move his head off the linoleum that threatened to impress its pattern on his skin.

He stared at the pen.

He slowly, horrifically, realized that the pen that stared at him wasn't his. The pen's mocking laughter echoed the pain that shot through all of his body as he stared at the word *Papermate* etched on the pen's cheap chrome coating. His pen was a *Schaeffer*, not some cheap knockoff. He felt something snap inside as if the pen's mocking silver surface was imprinted on his brain and he refused to respond. He locked on his perfect pen's memory and couldn't respond to, anyone or anything. Not to the journalism major who represented the campus paper, not to the incessant demands from Hank who wanted to know exactly what Justin's problem was. He didn't respond to the paramedics either, who wheeled him away. Not even to the doctor who talked to him for precisely one hour every day for the next three months. He simply sat in the white room they had placed him in and looked back at the walls that dumbly stared back at him. Justin didn't care anymore. His pen, his lost, beloved pen.

AlBick



artwork by Heather Vandervecht

